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ABSTRACT

This brief overview of a larger report focuses on a study of flaws in teacher selection and suggests improvements. It is noted that students do poorly in school because they often have new, inexperienced teachers. When these teachers get seniority, they transfer to "easier" schools, leaving new positions open to be again filled by novice teachers. To recruit more teachers for these positions, school districts should improve their selection process, reexamine certification and retirement policies that discourage out-of-state teachers, eliminate arbitrary limits for placing teachers on the district salary schedule, and remember that recruitment begins with having something to sell. Because research indicates that one "best system' of teaching doesn't exist and that teaching needs vary among settings, schools should have the freedom to select teachers who meet their specific needs. School districts need systems that deliver up-to-date information about candidates to all decision makers, including principals, personnel departments, and prospective teachers. Incentives should be provided to attract teachers to less attractive schools, and efforts should be made to disperse new teachers among all types of schools. (CB)

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Research in Brief

Chester E. Finn, Jr., Assistant Secretary

William J. Bennett, Secretary

Improving the Selection of Teachers

It's a "Catch-22": students do poorly in school because they often have novice teachers. One reason the students have novice teachers is because they do poorly.

This paradox is noted in a new report, *Effective Teacher Selection: From Recruitment to Retention*, by Arthur E. Wise, Linda Darling-Hammond, and Barnett Berry of the Rand Corporation. Their report, the result of a two-year study funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), pinpoints flaws in teacher selection and suggests improvements.

School policies give teachers with more seniority first crack at plum assignments. These policies encourage teachers to seek transfers to "easier" schools after a year or two in a hard one.

The result? Some schools – those with a reputation for enrolling low-achieving students – acquire a disproportionate number of novice teachers, who have few opportunities to learn from more experienced ones. Such policies contribute to high resignation rates: in some districts, 40 percent of beginning teachers leave within their first 2 years.

School districts might turn this situation around by designating high turnover schools as "induction schools," providing them with additional resources, and staffing them with a mix of seasoned professionals and beginners. This would provide experienced teachers with an attractive assignment recognizing their talent and experience. It would also allow new teachers to receive better supervision and better career preparation.

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Policies and Recruitment

Certain state and local policies can slow hiring and inhibit the employment of out-of-state teachers.

Item: Most school districts place senior teachers seeking transfers to new assignments before they hire new teachers. This can take time: the school may not be able to do so until late summer, often only days before school starts.

Item: State and district policies often bar teacher mobility by requiring specific courses for certification. Others refuse to transfer retirement credits or pay travel and moving expenses. Most limit the initial salary of teachers who haven't taught in the State or district.

Schools that want to recruit widely should:

- Improve the selection process so that good candidates won't drop out because of red tape and timing. Estimate job openings and hiring needs accurately and quickly by analyzing program needs, enrollment trends, and age of teaching force.
- Re-examine policies including those on certification and retirement that discourage out-of-state teachers.
- Eliminate arbitrary limits for placing teachers on the district salary schedule, giving full credit for teaching experience elsewhere. Be prepared to provide travel and moving expenses.
- Most important, remember the simple fact that recruitment begins with having something to sell, such as competitive salaries and pleasant working conditions.

Picking the Best

The definition of a "good teacher" varies from district to district and school to school. Some districts stress academic qualifications while others emphasize strong interpersonal skills. Research shows that:

- One "best system" of teaching doesn't exist;
- Teaching needs vary among schools within districts and from district to district;
- All schools need teachers with a special interpersonal skill such as working with young children or being able to motivate low-achievers; and
- Schools should have some freedom in teacher selection in order to hire those who meet their needs.

Logistics of Hiring

Logistical problems stymie hiring. First, vacancies aren't reported to district personnel departments in a timely manner because some teachers do not resign until summer.

Second, although school districts collect extensive information on candidates, they aren't technologically equipped to cross-reference such things as

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applicants qualified in more than one subject or possessing particular skills.

Third, principals do not have equal access to information about teaching applicants. Favored or more aggressive principals will acquire it while others – including new principals – won't.

To combat such difficulties, school districts need systems that deliver up-to-date information about candidates to all decision-makers.

Some districts – especially larger ones – use hiring procedures that seem bureaucratic and impersonal. To combat this problem, they should train hiring staff to give candidates appropriate and timely feedback. If applicants aren't treated courteously, they may get the unwelcome message that teachers aren't valued. The district may lose excellent candidates and unwittingly dissuade them from teaching.

Offer Incentives

As noted earlier, new teachers are often assigned to the least attractive schools. District policies allow senior teachers first choice among open positions. But parents also contribute to this problem. Influential parents demand the best, most experienced teachers for their children and help create conditions to attract such teachers. Less powerful parents – typically those with disadvantaged children – are less able to do so.

But school districts can contend with this problem. Some possible approaches would be to:

- Provide incentives to teachers – for example, recognize exemplary work. Improve working conditions in "unattractive" schools so that teachers with seniority won't seek transfers. Focus on the working conditions that teachers care about – for instance, employ aides who can free them to teach, and provide teachers with adequate materials.

- Disperse new teachers among schools of all types, or place them where they are adequately supervised.

- Establish conditions that encourage new teachers to remain in teaching. The work environment must be stable, teachers must have the tools they need to meet the needs of students, and opportunities for career development must be available.

- Give systematic training and support to new teachers, and formally designate a senior teacher to assist the new ones.

–Laurie Maxwell, Writer
Nancy Paulu, Branch Chief/Editor
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Copies of *Effective Teacher Selection: From Recruitment to Retention* (S10) and its appendix, *Case Studies for Effective Teacher Selection*, (S20) are available from the Publications Department, Rand Corporation, 1700 Main Street, P.O. Box 138, Santa Monica, California 90406-2138.

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